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ARMED FORCES

SOVIET MILITARY DOCTORS IN AFGHANISTAN

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[Article by Lt Col V. Skrizhalin: "Thank You, Shuravi"]

[Text] In Afghanistan a doctor is worshipped. If there is anyone who can sometimes compete with him in this regard it can only be a mullah. But whereas reverence toward a holy man is mostly fear of punishment by Allah, the relationship toward a doctor is like toward a benevolent magician.

Afghans also like the contact itself with the doctor. This is not surprising. For centuries the nation did not know medicine or medical assistance. And suddenly illnesses which the people had not conceived of living without began to recede. Not through prayers but through people in white smocks.

The Afghan relationship toward military doctors of the limited contingent of Soviet troops is a special one. Such altruistic and selfless doctors had not been seen here.

FIRST BORN. Looking at the exhausted Dzhamilya, who was tormented by birth-pangs and had already tired of struggling for her own life and that of her future child, the women's side of the home understood that this was the end. Dzhamilya, who had recently been full of strength, was not destined to experience the joy of motherhood.

There is an opinion that Afghans easily part with life: Allah has given and Allah has taken away. Today the Afghan people, having felt how much regard for human life as a social category has changed have also begun to evaluate it differently as a biological category. Although they still believe that life is given to them by Allah, many, many people are no longer inclined with their former fatal estrangement to give it up -- either their own or that of those close to them.

The women's side of the house did not want Dzhamilya to depart, even for a better world. "We must take her to the 'shuravi'" (meaning Soviet) -- that was the conclusion of the women's consultation. When the Soviet doctors took his 18 year old wife from the arm of Kadyr, the slender thread on which her life hung was ready to break.

"Prepare to operate immediately!"

There was still a glimmer of hope of saving the mother. The baby was in worse condition.

The words "duty" and "friendship" did not come to the minds of Lt Col Med Svc O. Popov, Maj Med Svc V. Valdin, doctors N. Nikitina or A. Karimov, or Nurse L. Tupitsyna during those tense minutes. But no words could compare in their effect with news of the operation, which was successful. Talk about such instances spreads from village [kishlak] to village with amazing speed, affirming feelings of gratitude and love toward the healers.

I flew to the garrison where it took place ten days after the birth of little Mamedzhan. I did not find Dzhamilya. She and the baby, a new citizen of Democratic Afghanistan, were discharged in good health. But the section in which the young mother had lain still resembled a floral greenhouse. Kadyr, the baby's father, literally filled the ward with roses.

MERCY MISSION. The large tribe of 2,000 people followed Abdraim with submissive obedience. And they referred to him, the indisputable authority and the only person in the village who had obtained an education, in no way other than "Engineer Abdraim." When the tribe faced a choice of which side to take, they chose the defenders of Islam. Abdraim had so stated.

However, no matter how separated the Afghans living in the mountains were, talk about the land which the new government was distributing and about the schools and hospitals opening reached even here.

Abdraim himself fell to thinking. He was no fool and understood why people were starting to look at him with distrust. The struggle against the government was going nowhere. Many families were orphaned or left without providers. Supplies in the store were becoming scant. Death knocked more and more often at the homes. And not from bullets; sickness was literally cutting people down. Children suffered most of all.

Abdraim entered negotiations. One of the first conditions he set forth was for medical assistance to the sick. Unless a doctor were to be provided there could be no discussion of switching to the side of the government.

This was seemingly a trivial ultimatum, but it turned out to be beyond the capability of the local authorities to fulfill. For all practical purposes there was no medical base in this mountainous, desert region. There would have been were it not for the constant attacks of the rebels on the villages and lines of communication. How many burned out and destroyed hospitals and medical workers who were either wiped out, driven into rebel bands or found it better to hide there were on account of the rebels! The authorities negotiating with Abdraim had no choice but to seek aid at the Soviet hospital.

The small column of five infantry fighting vehicles [BMP] slowly went deep into the mountains. The vehicles held medical tents, tables, couches and medicines. The road led through such narrow crevices that the BMP entered with difficulty.

The person who made the final decision to send the medical team to the warlike tribe which had until then been on the side of the counterrevolution understood clearly how dangerous and risky was this mercy mission. At the same time the mission of the Soviet doctors might play a decisive role in the tribe's selection of its future path. If no medical personnel were forthcoming the tribe would cease trusting the government authorities altogether.

It was decided. Volunteers would go to the village. They settled on Lt Col Med Svc V. Nikitin, Surgeon M. Matkarimovaya and Nurse Ye. Kamnevaya, plus security -- the crew and assault force of five BMP's.

How and with what would they be met in the mountains. The heart of each was gripped with alarm.

Abdraim himself greeted his guests. At first the number of armed people around was troubling. Later they became used to it. Like no one imagines going about without clothes, so the local Pushtoos today cannot imagine having no automatic weapon or rifle.

The aid station was set up on the bank of a mountain stream some 50 meters from a sharp bend [duvall]. The BMPs stood to the rear, inside the circle which was formed by the medical tents. Apprehensions that their hosts might not approve of these measures turned out to be for naught. To the contrary, they observed with understanding how precisely and quickly the "shuravi" organized their defense. It was not out of the question that the ringleaders of the counterrevolution would do everything possible to prevent a major tribe from switching to the side of the "infidels." Therefore, on the orders of their leader the entire male population of the village capable of bearing arms also occupied positions at the outer defensive perimeter.

It is hard to imagine but true. Those who yesterday considered themselves your sworn enemy today are concerned that nothing happens to you. Is such a metamorphosis possible? Yes, if people do good.

While ridding their patients of physical ailments, Valentin Nikolayevich Nikitin and his colleagues attempted to reach their hearts. And they made some discoveries. The people were tired of war. The deprivations and ordeals suffered for an unknown cause forced them to ponder who were their friends and who their enemies. The son of a mullah, for example, acknowledged with a child's candor: "My father always got along well with the 'shuravi.' He was just afraid to talk about it for fear that he would be killed."

The fates of many thousands of Afghans are enmeshed in a complex tangle of contradictions. The chains of religious traditions, fear of retribution, and their own, often nationalistic, understanding of patriotism interfere with their ability to choose.

It was difficult, but this tribe seems to have seized the thread which, once pulled, can unravel the whole tangle. Here they were together, an attentive doctor and two affectionate khan children. Nor were the guard soldiers, the sarbazy, at all like evil people. The children of the village had never met

better friends among grownups. The Soviet soldiers also found a common language with those who until very recently had viewed them only through the notch of a gun sight.

During the week the medical team received approximately 500 sick people and distributed necessary medicine. The villagers saw the "shuravi" off more than warmly. They gave them a present -- two chickens -- probably the last that they had. Then a reciprocal "gift" was presented. All the medical team's remaining foodstuffs were given out. "Tashakor, doctor, thank you!" the people said, shaking the hands of the Soviet medical team.

BANDAGING. Recently I again met Sr Lt Med Svc Gasan-Guseyn Sagidov. We had not seen each other for six months. On his frock had appeared a dark cherry-colored strip -- the Order of the Red Star. I asked what it had been for. He briefly told. In time it came out that the very sort of "incident from medical practice" which I had heard about so often from other doctors had occurred at the very same time. True, it is not referred to in the award documentation, but some share of the award results from the incident.

The column had to pass through a village without stopping. Several days before an Afghan unit had "smoked out" a band from there, and now only the Afghan military patrols recalled the battle.

An Afghan officer speaking good Russian stopped the column and explained that a seriously wounded woman was in the village. The cry, "Doctors!" passed from vehicle to vehicle.

While Sagidov and the officer walked along a crooked narrow alley, the doctor explained what had happened. When the ringleader of the band felt that he could no longer remain in the village, he ordered that the band take all the males with them into the mountains. Many of the "draftees" hid. In one household where the bandits knew there should be a young man they found no one but women. As he left, one bandit fired a burst at the house, "just so they would know!" Two bullets hit the frightened woman in the shin and stomach.

Two men met the Soviet and Afghan officers at the house: the young man whom the bandits had been seeking and an old man, the wounded woman's father. Sagidov realized that they had caught the men in the middle of an argument.

The Afghan officer explained that the young man did not want the "shuravi" to examine his wife. The old man, who was the village wise man, insisted on the opposite. He understood that his daughter would die if a doctor did not begin to treat her. Good sense won out.

The condition of the woman, who was very young, was grave. Gasan took off the bandage made from dirty hide, nut tree leaves and burnt wool. The wound had festered and there was a threat of gangrene.

As the medic cleaned and treated the wounds he felt that, despite her pain, the woman was feeling relief. Gasan also looked after the old man, who was

observing the actions of the Soviet doctor with the curiosity of a diligent student.

Gasan left the old man medicine and dressings and explained what to do.

They could not leave without refreshments. A rug was spread out in the shade. Tea, cookies and a beverage resembling sour clotted milk appeared.

Sagidov was never again in those parts, but he was sure that his patient had recovered. He was also sure that her young Afghan husband would not again hide from the bandits, but would take his place in the ranks of the defenders of the revolution.

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